SIGHTLESS--THEY WORK SAFELY

John H. Meader

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

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Sightless – They Work Safely

by JOHN H. MEADER, Superintendent
PENNSYLVANIA WORKING HOME FOR BLIND MEN
as told to JOHN O. NILAN
ADVERTISING MANAGER, AMERICAN MUTUAL

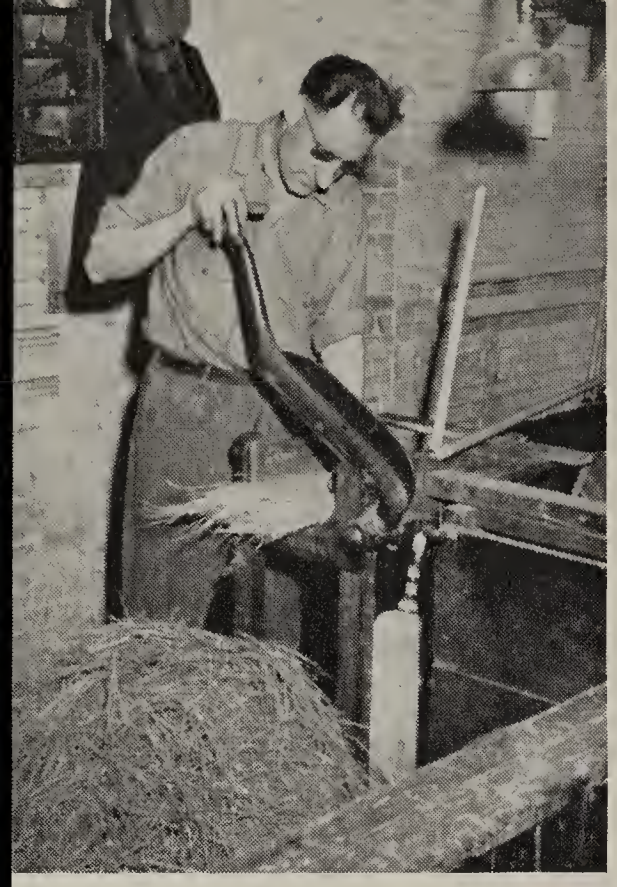
In presenting this study of one of American Mutual's most unusual — and exemplary — policyholders, the Pennsylvania Working Home for Blind Men, we wonder if the outstanding safety achievements of this organization don't provide answer for the question "Can sightless workers work safely?" Here one hundred and twenty-five men — most of them totally blind — are running machines, handling materials, cutting, trimming, contributing finished products to the war effort — and doing it with amazing infrequency of accidents. Their secret — first, recognize hazards, then eliminate them.

MOST OUTSIDERS who visit our busy organization are usually astounded to see our workers, nearly all of whom are totally blind, handle power-driven machinery, use sharp knives and cutters, move all through the plant — with perfect serenity, confidence and dexterity. They are even more amazed when they learn that accidents to these workers — admittedly handicapped in the serious business of avoiding accidents — rarely suffer a disabling injury. To them it seems unbelievable that men who cannot see what they are doing — who do their work entirely by touch, hearing and habit — could possibly avoid having serious falls, losing fingers or getting serious cuts, bumping and bruising themselves. It's not so surprising to me, perhaps because I've watched them operate for so long, more probably because we, over a number of years, know almost every hazard here and have taken thorough steps to eliminate or safeguard each known hazard in our plant.

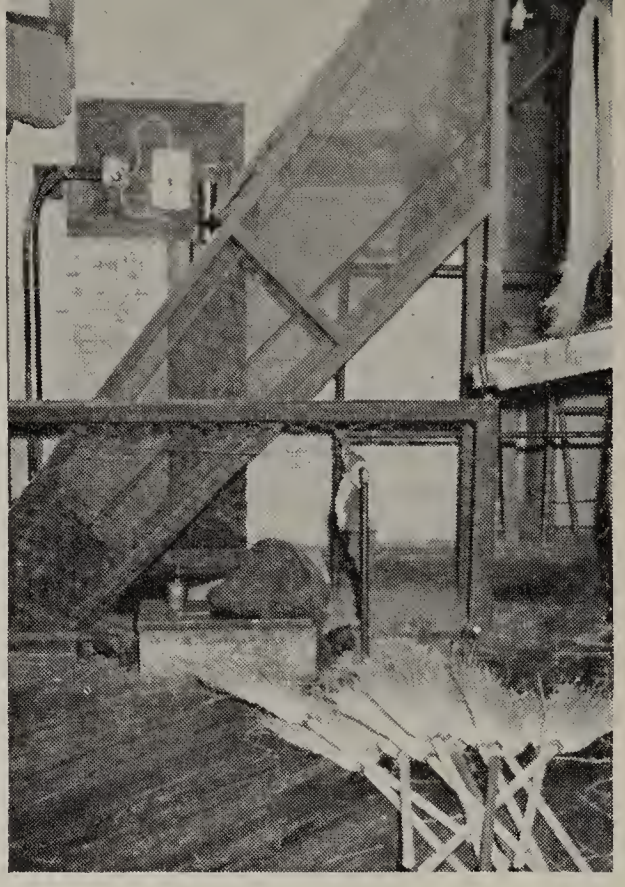
This organization was founded in 1875 as a place where sightless men could come, learn a trade and earn for themselves an honest, self-respecting living. About half of our people live in our Home which is adjacent to the factory; the other half live in private homes, travel to and from work in normal fashion. Over the number of years we have been in business (actually we are a non-profit organization) we have engaged in the manufacture of a number of products — today we are largely in war production, making thousands of mops and brooms. Our people work a full work-week of 40 hours.

In looking over our operations from a safety standpoint, I find a number of sound, easy-to-understand reasons as to why we are able to achieve such consistently high safety levels. Possibly the first of these is the safety consciousness of the workers themselves. Looking over my records to see just why each member of our working crew is without sight, I find that of the 125 nearly half lost the use of their eyes because of accident. Needless to say these men need no cautioning from us — or education — on the importance of doing their jobs carefully and safely. The rest of our people just naturally seem to recognize their greater-than-normal susceptibility to accident and govern themselves accordingly. Starting with an accident-awareness condition like this, it has been a relatively easy job to teach a man how to do his job safely — and to keep him doing it that way at all times.

From a safety program standpoint, our job (referring to myself and our supervisors who are sighted people) has been to recognize the hazards peculiar to our plant and the type of persons we have here. Of all the known hazards, we might consider the possibility of fire the worst — not from the point of imminence but from the angle of human catastrophe if a fire should start. Accordingly we have placed considerable emphasis on the problem of speedy evacuation. However, there are compensating



The Home's blind workers have greater respect for knives — use them more cautiously.



Moving parts are well protected with mechanical guards. Main drive belt is completely enclosed.

Winding mops with wire coul very well cause many accident but training offsets the hazar

factors which, to my mind, reduce the helplessness of a blind person in an emergency of this sort. Smoke, for instance, may smart the eyes but does not hinder the blind person in making his exit from the building as he has been fully trained over a period of time in making use of all available exits from his department to the outside without the use of sight.

While a blind person can readily smell a fire, he probably would not know its source and, of course, couldn't see it and, therefore, would be less panicky than a sighted person. Another angle is that the blind usually follow instructions much better than the sighted and, therefore, can be definitely relied on to follow instructions to the letter. Fire drills are a regular part of our program — the emphasis, of course, being on evacuation. By constant practice, our men are all well acquainted with the numerous escape exits and the use of the broad, high-railed fire escapes. These, by the way, have been so placed that they are interconnecting between the Home and the plant; irrespective of which building might be the source of the fire, evacuation would be possible and our people are trained to handle themselves on this basis. In the fire drill training they are told of special areas, stairs, etc., which are to be avoided and, with their acquaintance or knowledge of all exits, they can safely go around this dangerous area.

Arrangements have been made with the Philadelphia Fire Department that the first fire company at the scene do nothing but assist the blind workmen from the building — the second fire company and others being assigned to fight the fire.

Fire prevention is, of course, important — the material we are working with is highly flammable and our buildings are certainly no more fire resistant than the average. Obviously our workers would be of no assistance in fighting a fire; the bulk of that job, from the employee standpoint, would fall to our supervisors who are well trained to handle such an emergency. Our building is protected by a carefully maintained sprinkler system and is fully equipped with fire-fighting apparatus such as hoses and extinguishers.

All stairways in the building have been constructed on a 5-10-5 basis — five the first flight and turn, then a run of ten steps and turn, and finally a flight of five. This point of safety is good assurance against falling, a hazard that is obviously very important here. Our people can use these stairways with perfect confidence, always know exactly at what place they are on any stairway. Another "must" in our safety work is that aisles be kept free and clear of tools, equipment, material. Equally important in this respect is the layout of working areas — aisles are straight and wide, all machine areas are enclosed with high guard railings.

One hazard we have to watch constantly is that of working pressure. Both our work-

Aisles are kept free and clear of tools, equipment and material. Equally important, aisles are straight and wide and machinery and the entire working area are enclosed with high guard railings with only one small opening.

ers and our supervisors realize that to work safely they must operate at a measured pace — necessarily slower than a sighted worker. In times like these where speed of production is the "order of the day," we find it difficult to refrain from asking for higher rates of production. The one thing that checks us is the knowledge that accidents would start happening and the end result would be a lower rate instead of a higher rate of production.

In the machine area where there is a battery of power-driven broom stitchers, it is the "call of the day" to hear *"I'm turning on the juice."* One man is assigned to the job of turning on the power — when he does he yells his warning, waits for confirming okays from the other operators before setting the machines in motion. This entire area is enclosed by railings with only one small opening. Naturally these machines are well equipped with mechanical guards, the main drive belt is completely enclosed in a wire guard and all flywheels are equally well protected.

As each new worker comes into the organization he is assigned to an experienced fellow-worker or companion who either rooms or works with him and whose duties are to guide the new man from his room to his job and return. This companion continues leading the new workman until he can safely navigate for himself, not only between the job and his room but also to be able to use safely most of the stairs and fire escapes in case of emergency.

The workshop of the Home has one instructor whose sole duty is to fully instruct all new workmen in their work. They are usually started on simple hand work and non-mechanical operations that are away from machinery and dangerous working areas. As the new man progresses he is gradually instructed in the operation of machinery and made very conscious of danger points of the equipment. Over a period of several weeks this new workman must fully qualify as a safe and efficient worker at the machines before he is permitted to operate the machines without direct supervision. Of course, his fellow-workmen around him also keep in close contact with him and guide him in his work should he need assistance.

Occasionally we do have accidents but, fortunately, they are almost always minor in result. We recognize, however, that minor injuries are frequently the forerunners of major ones. To prevent this from happening we make sure that every injury is promptly and regularly treated — first aid in our own plant, professionally by a nearby hospital.

Looking at our operations from the angle of safety, it seems that our record of safe operations hinges on two basic points — we know what the hazards are, we take adequate measures to forestall these hazards from ever becoming accidents. To

(*Continued on page 24*)

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Be Prepared for More Absenteeism

We may anticipate that "absenteeism" will get worse before it gets better. For the simple reason that, as more and more "marginal" workers — 'teen age youths, women, older persons and those with physical handicaps — come into the field of industrial production, they may be expected to aggravate a situation which already is regarded in many quarters as critical.

These classes of workers will bring with them their own peculiar sets of absenteeism-causing conditions, among them lower stamina, family difficulties and greater accident proneness. We can count on man-days being lost, too, by these groups for the same capricious causes which are estimated to have cost the war effort 35,000,000 man-hours last year, through "willful" or "voluntary" absenteeism.

If we accept the hypothesis outlined above, what steps can industrial management take to prepare itself for the problems ahead?

For one thing, plant operators will be obliged to continue, even expand, their efforts toward reducing voluntary absenteeism. Whatever form these may have taken in the past — morale-building plant meetings, payroll enclosures, shop posters, etc. — they will be necessary more than ever before to keep work attendance up and production running. Changes in the strategy and direction of these programs should probably be made to meet the changed audience at which they are directed. Thus, a working group consisting largely of women with families would be better addressed on the subject of time taken off for shopping rather than of pay-day "jags."

Unquestionably the biggest opportunity confronting industrial management is to reduce both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism by adopting and instituting simple, inexpensive health and safety measures in industrial plants and by educating both regular and "marginal" workers in proper health and accident-prevention practices for their off-the-job hours.

Does this sound like too ambitious an undertaking — open to question because of its many social and economic implications? Then consider these figures. True, 35,000,000 man-hours are lost through "voluntary" absenteeism annually but, in the same period, *450,000,000 industrial man-days were missed from production because of illnese and accident.*

When twelve times the number of days are lost to productive effort by workers' illness and accidents, it is only horse sense for management to work and worry twelve times as hard on the health and accident problem of their workers, as on their absenteeism. In fact, in the coming months (as we have said above) the ratio will more than likely increase as more youths, more women, more over-age and handicapped persons go to work in industry.

SIGHTLESS — They Work Safely

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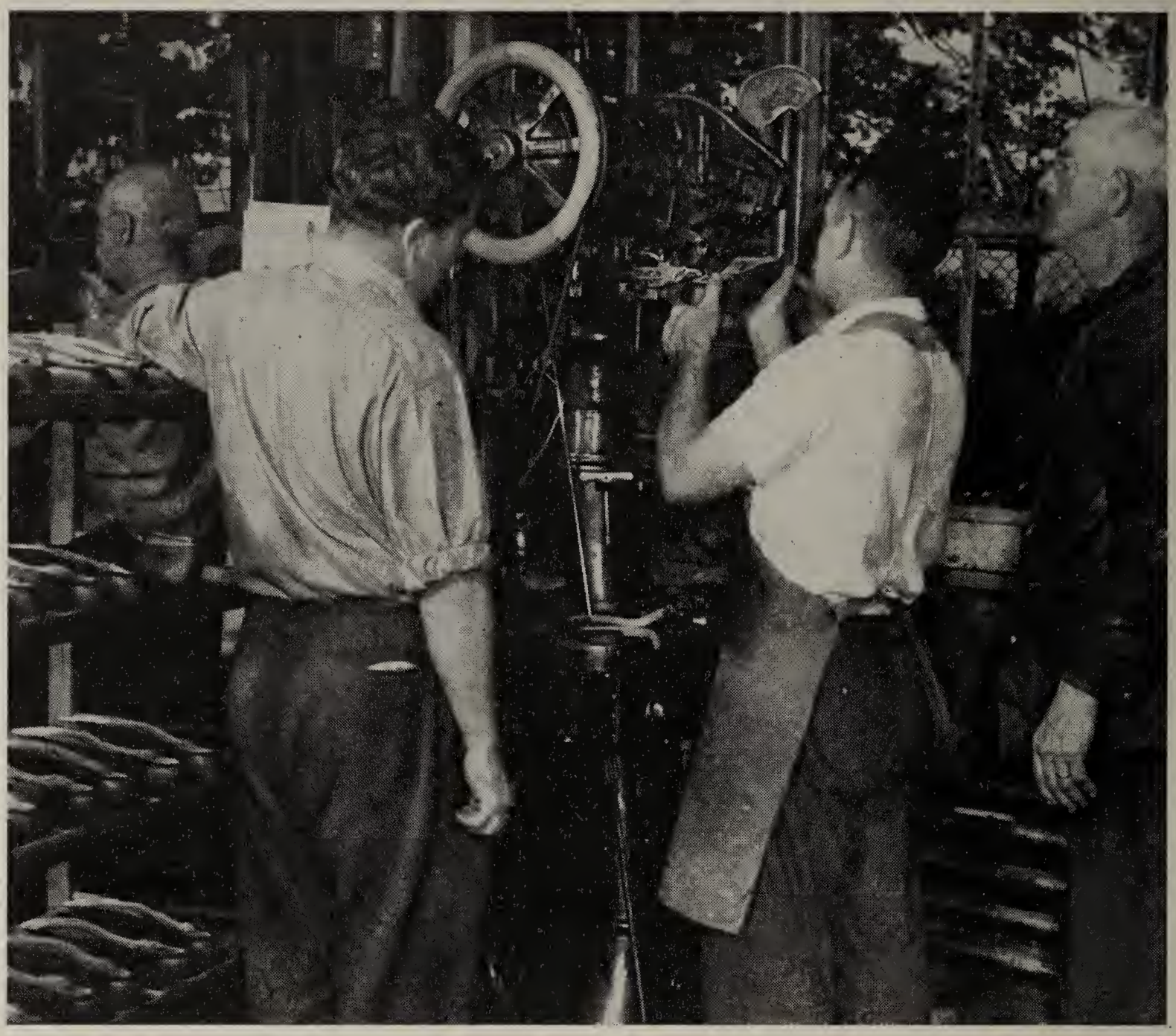
that question — possibly more important now than ever before — "Can blind workers be safe workers?" our answer is yes. It's purely a question of seeing the problem in full perspective, knowing what you have to deal with and acting accordingly.

If results like this can be achieved with sightless workers, why can't it be accomplished — not only as well but better — with workers who can see? We wonder also if the facts presented by this article do not answer, at least in part, the problem now confronting industry as to whether or not the physically handicapped worker can be effectively utilized.—Editor.

"VICTORY-SHIFT" WORKERS

In Hartford, Connecticut, manpower officials are tapping a vast new reservoir. They're hiring clerks, salesmen, teachers, professional people — all for part-time work in war factories. Called "split-shift" workers, these men and women are doing a first-rate job on the production lines and they love it. They keep their white collar jobs, of course, and work in the factories on their "off hours." So far, none has suffered any ill health as a result of holding down two jobs, which certainly adds weight to the old theory that fatigue is largely boredom.

Forbes, February 21, 1943



Linking employer and employed, the supervisor has much of the responsibility for inspection. This he can accomplish by setting up departmental counter checks and inspection support.

knows, works directly contrary to the quick and safe establishment of operating efficiency.

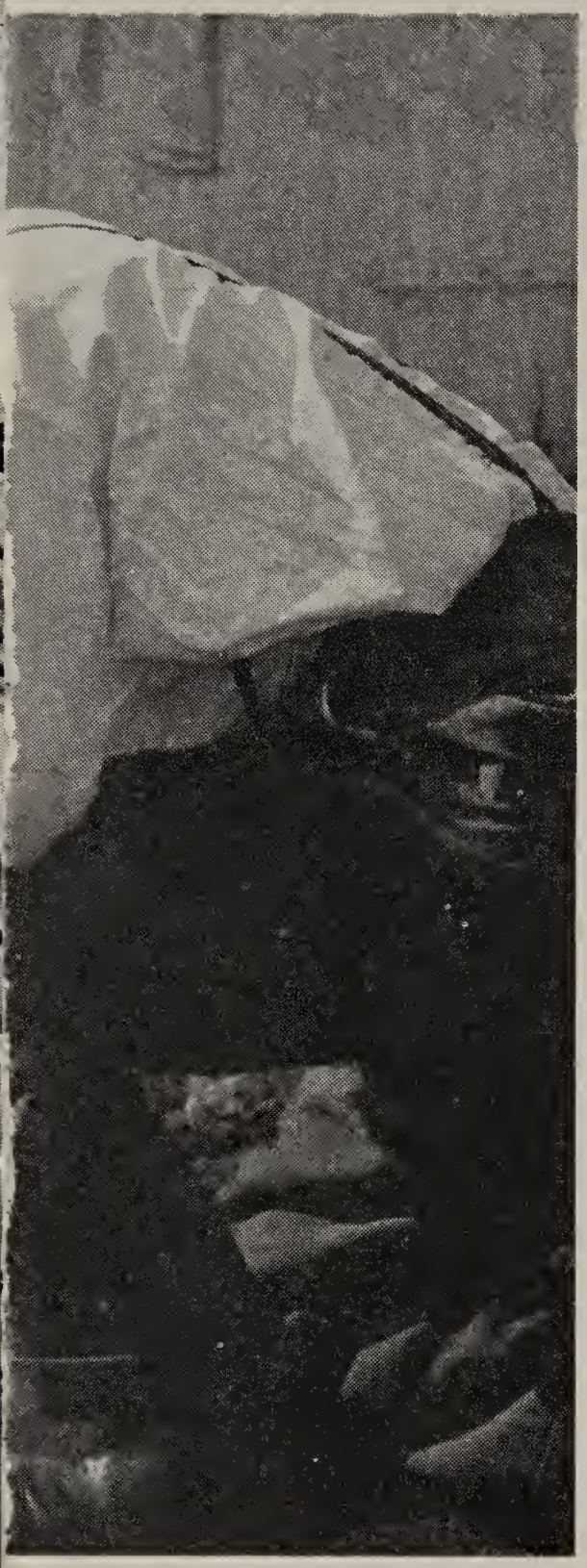
By the same token, after establishing his operating crew, the supervisor should follow the principle of the plant safety organization and set up counter checks in his own department and relieve his time by having, within his own jurisdiction, subordinate inspection support. Within the sphere of his operations, this procedure will serve to keep him posted on housekeeping, physical safeguards, operating practices and methods, etc., and decrease the possibility of his work group and area falling afoul of the plant-wide inspection conducted by the executive safety committee.

To the wide-awake supervisor, time budgeting, practical delegation of work and honest acceptance of facts revealed by inspection will, in the end, enhance results, relieve worry and bother and promote departmental efficiency. To function any other way, he knows, would mean personal shouldering of a multitude of observation and analysis tasks, all of which would be assumed at the expense of safety and sacrifice of time for the other functions of his job.

To summarize, plant inspections have always been a definite and essential part of all well organized accident prevention programs. Because of its nature, inspection may get the name of fault-finding, but properly undertaken by carefully selected personnel, in the manner it deserves as a skilled activity, inspection is a fact-finder which guides employer and employee to greater plant safety.

In keeping with the Home's firm principle that plant safety must conform to the physical handicap of its workers, all incidental stairwáys and passageways — such as this drawbridge — are guarded by locking gates. This is good assurance against the very obvious hazard of falls.

One man is assigned the job of turning on the power for the battery of power-driven broom stitchers. Before doing so he yells, *"I'm turning on the juice,"* and waits for confirming okays from the other operators before setting the machines in motion.



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